[Miss Emma Willis]

The Locke Mill

Concord, N. C.

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M. L. W.

MISS EMMA WILLIS (CALLED AUNT EMMA)

Aunt Emma Willis to very proud of being eighty-one years old. She is proud too that she doesn't have to wear glasses, even for reading, and that she still has her own teeth. If you ask her about cotton mills the will say quite causally in her high, thready voice “I worked in a cotton mill for sixty-three years, but I never did care for it much. I had to quit six years ago when I had a bad case of the grippe.”

Now that the weather is cool she sits in her walnut rocker by the window and knits lace from spool thread. “I just make up the patterns,” she will explain “and every time I knit a long piece I change because I get tired of doing the same one.” For making enough lace to go on a pair of pillow cases (between 80 and 90 yards) she charges 50¢ and supplies the thread. This is the only money she can earn now.

But Aunt Emma is not doleful about it. With a sly smile on her face she will tell you quietly that she “lives on charity.” Then her gray eyes twinkle as she says “I'm just like everybody else now, letting the government support me. Before they gave me my old 2 age pension, my church and the folks I knowd here kept me going.”

Aunt Emma is too “stiff in her bones” to go out much but she is tremendously interested in what is happening in the world and reads anything that is given to her. When I brought

her some copies of Hollands' she was delighted because she likes the poetry in it she said. One of her favorite magazines is The Flaming Sword, a Fundamentalist Baptist magazine which her niece sends her from Texas. The editor has been writing a series of articles on his travels through the [west?], /cap and Aunt Emma was particularly interested in what he had to say about the Mormons. “Those people know how to get along,” she commented.

Important in her life are the visits from the preacher of the small Lutheran Church — in the mill section — to which the belongs. “Every week that comes, he is here to see me,” she said, “and I surely do enjoy him. It tickles me to look at him because he's so young — just a boy you'd call him — and he's got a new baby new too.”

She spit in a can that stood on the window sill, then took a carefully folded square of cloth from her apron pocket and wiped the snuff from her lips. Everything 3 about her person was precise — her dark voile dress with the checked apron tied tightly over it; her hair, carefully parted in the middle and looped back on either side so that the delicate gold crosses in her ears were visible. Her face was remarkable — long straight featured, and intelligent. Behind her quiet reserve was the humor that occasionally showed in her eyes or the manner in which she made a remark.

It was not easy to get Aunt Emma to tell about herself. She was more interested in talking of the Mormons, her preacher, what had been happening in town or in reminiscing about Concord in the old days.

“I was born down near Gold Hill, but I've lived all my life in Concord. Folks used to tell me I had a foreign look,” she said with pride “and I guess it was because one of my Grandfathers was a Yankee. He settled up near Greensboro. My Great-Grandfather came from Germany, but I'm Scotch-Irish.

“When the war came and Pa went off to fight, I was so little I just can't remember such about it. But law, I'll never forget when the Yankees burned Salisbury. I wasn't but four years old but to this day I can remember how the sky looked that night — it was red

all over one side. The Yankees never did hurt us; I guess they must have knowd my Grandfather 4 was one.

“Pa came back from the war, but he died not so long after that. I had to go to work to support the family. There was my mother, who had the heart trouble; my little sister and little brother; and my old aunt who couldn't walk a step for twelve years before she died.”

I interrupted Aunt Emma to ask if she had ever gone to school.

“Why yes, some men here in town run a school in a log building down Spring Street, and I went. I got all the education I ever had up until the time I was ten year old, but I learned everything so good I never have forgotten it. They made you back then.” Her faint voice become pert “I'll bet right now I could outspell any of these teachers down here at the school.

“Course, I guess I would have gone on and maybe learned some more if I hadn't been bound to support my family. When I was twelve, I started work in the old McDonald Mill that had been running here in town since before the war. It was the only cotton mill in Concord then. I went to work every morning at six and stayed until seven in the evening. They paid 35¢ a day. But law, in those days people didn't mind work — we 5 had a good time. Many a night I would come in from the mill, wash my face, put on my hat and go off to choir practice or somewhere. I was young and strong so I didn't get tired.”

During her sixty-three years in the mill, Aunt Emma worked at various wages and hours in the Locke, the Osbarrus, the Branoord and the Kannapolis plants. She is not ashamed to boast a little about her record, although the pretends at first that her work was a mere matter of duty and routine. “Every pay day that come, I brought my money home and laid it in my mother's hand; then after she died, I turned every cent over to my sister who kept house for me almost fifty years. I worked steady too, once while I was at the Cannon Mill I went eleven years without missing a day's pay. Back then if you didn't go, they'd send for you because they didn't have no one else to do your work. Now they've got more hands for

a job than they know what to do with. If a hand lays out, they've got somebody else to do his job and pretty soon he'll find himself out of work."

Of all the places she worked, Aunt Emma liked the Cabarrus Mill best because it had so many country people. "Old Mr. Cannon used to say when he was alive, that he wanted to get country folks to work for him because they'd stay with him. They did too." Her voice changed 6 tone as she added "You know how mill people are; they just move about from place to place."

Once during our conversation Aunt Emma made a remark without her usual shy little smile. "There's something I've been studying about," and she put down her knitting. "I spent all my life working as hard as I could, but now I've got so I can't go anymore. You just look at the rich people this town has — people who've got plenty and more than they can ever use. It looks to me like the town ought to take care of the old people who can't help theirselves anymore.

"Why I don't know what I'd a done after I quit work, if it hadn't been for the folks around me, and the mill. The Locke Mill let me stay in one of their houses, without paying a cent of rent, until last fall when they sold off the property my house was on. Then I had to move."

She moved in with Granny Lizzie Morgan, sharing the expenses of the house rent and supplies. Both get old age pensions, and the City Welfare Department helps them occasionally. Although she is too proud to say anything, Aunt Emma — fastidious and intellectually keen — cannot possibly be happy with Granny.

Granny at eighty-four is fat, talkative, vulgar, 7 and full of energy. She thumps about in her bare feet sweeping, scouring, washing clothes; she rushes to a neighbor's house to phone for wood or ice; goes to see Mary Alexander, the landlady, about the rent; frequently walks the mile down to the Welfare Department to try to wrangle something from it. When she came in to see me, she sat in a straight chair tilted precariously on the two hind legs, took a dip of sniff snuff , and talked incessantly in her low, course voice, her head shaking with

palsy. She came from #10 township, has never worked in a mill, but some of her children have. “I've got five children a-livin',” she said dolefully “and not a one of them will look after their poor old mother.”

For sixteen years Granny has lived in the drab four-room house which she rents from a Negro woman, Mary Alexander. Mary owns three such houses facing on a ragged meadow by the Locke Mill Village. Granny's place has plumbing, no electricity, and only fireplaces for heating. It needs paint badly outside; inside the gray ceiled walls are / dirty, the unpainted floor stained with tobacco.

“All the time I have been a-living here Mary hain't done a thing to this house,” Granny drawled. “She says it takes all she's got to go over to that college in Charlotte and take all them special courses, but she's 8 got plenty of wealth. The Welfare Department told her $16 a month was too much rent to charge on this house. She won't come down a penny, though.”

The rooms in which we sat was furnished with Granny's things. The iron bed, chest of drawers, littered table, split bottom chairs, and even the calendars on the wall, the pictures and the postcards on the mantel were hers. Only the nicely made rocker in which she sat belonged to Aunt Emma.

When I rose to go, Aunt Emma smiled shyly and told me goodbye, but she didn't get up. Granny enveloped me in her soft arms, squeezed me and urged me to come again. “We love to have company,” she said heartily, then asked me if I knew the people in the Welfare Department. If I did, she wanted me to tell them something for her.

Aunt Emma watched me go from the window.